



Amber Calistro takes in stride daily anti-cancer injections and blood tests given by her mother. Hair lost during chemotherapy is starting to grow back.

Amber's mom fights for choice

By JUDI DOHERTY
Staff Reporter

Being in the Bahamas for a week or two is a treat. Being in the Bahamas day after day for many lonely months while undergoing treatment for cancer is no great shakes.

Patricia Calistro, the mother of a 4-year-old cancer patient who has been undergoing controversial cancer treatment in the Bahamas, is back in the United States briefly, waging an intensive campaign to allow alternative cancer therapies to be practiced here legally.

Residents of Milford, Calistro and her daughter, Amber, have been in Freeport on Grand Bahama Island since May, when the little girl began cancer treatments at the experimental Immunology Researching Center run by scientist Lawrence Burton.

"My goal is to get Burton here so I don't have to be down there," Calistro told *The Register* Tuesday. She plans to return to the Bahamas Saturday.

Burton's work is not recognized by most members of the established medical profession, who maintain he has not yet proven the effectiveness of his therapy. But Calistro believes his program offers the best chance for Amber.

The work done by Burton is aimed at bolstering the body's natural immune system to fight cancer.

Calistro acknowledged that Burton's ideas may not be the answer for all cancer patients, but she emphasized that she felt Americans should have the freedom of choice to pick whatever kinds of treatment they deemed best.

Calistro and other cancer patients and their families in the Bahamas are uniting, she said, to bring about a change in restrictions imposed on alternative cancer treatments.

Burton had been conducting his research in Great Neck, N.Y., but moved to the Bahamas in 1977 to escape what he perceived as harassment from federal agencies and major institutions and organizations within the established medical profession, according to Calistro.

Calistro maintains that Burton and other promoters of alternative cancer therapies are not able to practice their cancer treatment here because of the "greed, money and power" of the established fields.

"The medical establishment is too proud to admit they don't have all the answers," she said.

Although she did not dismiss the advancements made by conventional medicine, Calistro said advancements are also being made by other factions, and that practitioners of conventional medicine should be open to other ideas.

Calistro's skepticism about the established medical profession stems from experiences she had after she first discovered a lump behind her daughter's right ear last August.

"I took her to six doctors who told me, 'Don't worry, lots of kids get lots of lumps and bumps,'" she said. The growth was finally diagnosed as cancer by physicians at Yale-New Haven Hospital.

The lump was surgically removed and a follow-up treatment of radiation therapy and chemotherapy was prescribed. Tests determined that cancer cells had spread to the child's brain and spine.

Uneasy about treating Amber with conventional radiation and chemotherapy, Calistro spent weeks researching current theories about cancer treatment, many of which were unconventional, and settled ultimately on Burton's clinic in the Bahamas.

When Amber left for the Bahamas, a second tumor had started to form near the incision, Calistro said, but that growth flattened out after the girl had been in the Bahamas under treatment for several weeks.

Now, however, there is additional tumor growth at the incision site, and recent X-rays of Amber show that the tumor is inside the skull as well as outside. Calistro will be talking to surgeons at Yale-New Haven to see if they can remove the new growth.

Removing much of the growth surgically, Calistro said, will give Amber's immune system less to fight against. She said she still plans to continue Burton's therapy, with or without the surgery.

Amber is in the Bahamas with a friend and will be coming back to Connecticut if doctors think there is a chance of successfully operating on her.

Amber's treatment in the Bahamas involves taking up to three blood samples a day and injecting her eight or nine times a day with Burton's serum. Amber, Calistro said, is taking the routine in stride, and despite the tumor, is feeling very well.

"She's as beautiful as ever," her mother said.